Advance Directives for Dementia Patients

The best time to plan for your future health and the health of your loved ones is now. An accident or sudden illness may come without warning, leaving confused friends and family members to struggle with critical decisions. People all too often put off important life decisions for the same reasons they forget to save money for a rainy day or to get those annual flu shots — the future just doesn’t seem that real or pressing until it finally arrives.

However, not addressing the issues while you are still healthy, leaves family and friends in the lurch should you become incapacitated in any way. Take the time now, while you still have your health, to communicate with your loved ones concerning your wishes should you become unable to speak or think clearly.

There’s No Time Like The Present

The importance of good future planning is all the more vital for individuals with progressive neurodegenerative diseases such as dementia or Alzheimer’s Disease and who may be considering hospice care in the near future. In fact, the very nature of dementia and its progressive symptoms demands comprehensive planning. For individuals with a recent diagnosis of dementia, the question can no longer be when to plan, but rather how to get started. Dementia and Alzheimer’s sufferers must make plans early while they can still communicate their own wishes. Plans should be in place long
before the final stages of the illnesses.

**Legal Documents for Peace of Mind**

Fortunately, you can file a number of official legal documents referred collectively as *Advance Directives* (AD) to protect your wishes if you happen to lose the ability to self advocate in the future. ADs specify the actions taken on an individual’s behalf by family and healthcare workers when a person is no longer able to make decisions on his or her own due to illness. In the case of dementia sufferers, the need for a comprehensive set of ADs must be priority one before the later stages of cognitive decline set in.

**State Specific Planning For Alzheimer’s Disease and Dementia Patients**

With the needs and concerns of dementia and Alzheimer’s patients and their loved ones very much in mind, a few states have begun to offer specific ADs for those coping with the diseases. This new advance planning document allows sufferers of dementia and Alzheimer’s Disease to record the specific difficulties associated with these neurodegenerative illnesses.

Documentation serves as a personal record to address disease specific issues such as choice of living arrangements, cost of care questions, intimacy and relationship obstacles, social independence, and even the care of beloved pets. The document serves as a bold declaration of self advocation, stressing the need to emphasize your own control over decisions that affect your life. Even if the document is not legally recognized in your state, it still serves as an invaluable guide to your loved ones.
Taking Important Steps

In order to fully cover all of your wishes, the organization advises that you sit down to plan your future with a full spectrum of legal documents and ADs. Remember, check your state laws to see the exact forms and documents required in your area as AD documentation and filing laws may vary from state to state.

Step One

Set down your healthcare needs and concerns in a comprehensive living will. These legal documents are the earliest and most widely utilized type of AD. Living wills detail what type of desired health care you want followed once you are no longer able to make quality of life decisions. Living wills should contain exact wording on end-of-life treatments and procedures. Some living wills even contain strictures to forbid burdensome and unnecessary medical interventions such as life support.

Step Two

Choose a durable power of attorney to act on your behalf. Power of attorney grants legal decision making status to another person, often a family member, in cases where you have been deemed incompetent. Documents of durable power of attorney have some advantages over living wills and can cover a broader moment in time than a living will on its own. Durable power of attorney allows an appointed agent to make real time decisions for your well being as opposed to the living will which is somewhat limited to the wishes and desires you made when you were still healthy and far removed from the current situation.
Step Three

Get your estate in order. Nothing mucks up the legal process more for your family after your death than unclear or incomplete estate planning. Estate planning, including wills, specify the instructions for handling of your property, finances, and possessions after death.

Additional Planning

If the planning period is long past and you find yourself in the position of having to assess the competence of a loved one coping with dementia without the aid of ADs, the organization stresses that you try your best to preserve the individual’s right to make independent decisions. We recommend that you respect the dignity of your loved one through the adherence of a few important key principles:

1. **Respect the person’s wishes**: Our dignity is tied to our independence. Unless hindered by serious safety issues, you should consider the wishes of the individual with dementia before all other alternatives.

2. **Have faith in his or her ability to cope**: A mind in crisis is not a crisis of mind. You must understand that a diagnosis of Alzheimer’s or dementia, though frightening, is not an automatic sign of incompetence.

3. **Accept the individual’s right to disagree**: It is not your job to be always right. Competent people, whether suffering from dementia or not, have the right to refuse treatment or medication. Anyone with mild or moderate dementia should have this right protected.

4. **Recognize that symptoms are often separate from competence**: You are what you think, not what you do. The inability to drive, handle finances, live independently, or maintain regular hygiene does not mean that a person can no longer make logical decisions about medical care and end-of-life services.
5. **Acknowledge that an individual may need help:** Prioritize tasks to emphasize quality of life. It may benefit the individual to appoint a legal guardian for specific tasks, such as finances, for example, in order to maintain independence in other aspects of life like personal care, food, shelter and medical care.